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actor engagement in service ecosystems**

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Rural place branding processes: actor engagement in service eco-systems

Abstract

Purpose: The place branding process in cities and tourism destinations is usually steered by a central organization, but in rural places a focal actor often does not exist. The aim of this paper is to identify which approaches to place branding processes are applied in different rural places. This is done by seeing the place branding process as a service eco-system with focus on actor engagement.

Research design: A theoretical framework based on the concepts of service eco-systems and actor engagement is developed. This is then applied to analyze qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with participants from several Danish rural places.

Findings: We identify four different types of rural place branding processes along three dimensions: (1) existence and type of a focal actor, (2) type, extent, and temporal properties of other actor groups' engagement, and (3) organization of the process, including its formalization, centralization, and strategic focus. Type 1 is a highly formalized, centralized, and strategically driven process under the leadership of a public authority. The other types are community-based approaches. Type 2 is formalized, centralized, and strategically driven process. Type 3 is less formalized but also centralized and strategically focused. Type 4 is a non-formalized, decentralized process with ad-hoc initiatives.

Originality: Our paper applies a service marketing-based framework to analyze qualitative empirical data from different cases of rural places and identify different place branding processes.

Keywords: service eco-systems; rural places; focal actor; temporal and behavioral properties; formalization; strategic orientation

Introduction

Challenges such as economic and population decline, loss of identity (Eugenio-Vela and Barniol-Carcasona, 2015), and urbanization (Horlings and Marsden, 2014) lead rural places to focus on reputation improvement to attract new residents (Sørensen, 2018). Rural places also try to keep the young from moving away (Thuesen *et al.*, 2018). A common approach to supporting local development and improving reputation is the practice of place branding (Anholt, 2010; Gyimóthy, 2019). However, despite a growing number of publications on rural place branding, relatively little is known about the organizational approach of rural place branding initiatives (Gulisova, 2021). Studies of the processes applied to develop place brands have mainly been done in cities, destinations, and nations (e.g. Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013; Muñiz, 2016). This research highlights that the leadership of place branding is usually seen as the responsibility of local governments or Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) (Fayzullaev *et al.*, 2021; Hanna and Rowley, 2015) and tourism offices and involves marketing and branding professionals (Braun *et al.*, 2014). Unlike cities, rural places are characterized by lower population density and larger distances to the nearest administrative centre (Søgaard, 2011). Such geographical, demographic, and administrative differences lead to expectations that the organization of place branding in rural places might deviate from cities, nations, and tourism destinations. Vuorinen and Vos (2013) found that place

branding in rural regions rests mainly on the efforts of private stakeholders, while the public organizations are needed to create the conditions for a joint approach.

Especially since the emergence of service-dominant (S-D) logic in marketing (Vargo and Lusch, 2004) and its adoption in the place marketing and branding field (Warnaby, 2009), place branding scholars have called for the application of more inclusive, participative approaches to place branding (e.g. Kavaratzis, 2012). In destination branding, it has been suggested that different branding strategies may be required depending on the administrative context, the type and diversity of involved stakeholders, and other place-specific factors (Hankinson, 2009). Furthermore, Gulisova (2021) revealed that different rural places apply different place branding processes depending on their administrative setup, the initiator, and the goal for the branding initiative. Hence, a place's institutional arrangements – its system and structure of 'rules, norms, meanings, symbols, practices, and similar aides to collaboration' (Vargo and Lusch, 2016) - matter for the type of branding process to be applied.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to provide a better understanding of the relationships between institutional arrangements of rural places and their approaches to place branding. This study builds on Gulisova's (2021) typology, highlighting the diversity of rural place branding processes regarding the involvement of various actor groups depending on the contextual characteristics of the place. Gulisova's (2021) typology is modified and extended. First, in addition to identifying the involved actors, the type, extent, and temporal properties of local actor engagement in the place branding process are investigated. Second, different forms of organization of rural place branding processes are studied concerning the institutional arrangements. Third, the dynamics of rural place branding processes and their evolution over time are investigated.

The following research question will guide the analysis and conceptual development:
How does the organization of rural place branding processes relate to the type of involved actors and their engagement in the process?

The theoretical perspective of actor engagement and service eco-systems (Vargo *et al.*, 2020) is applied to answer the research question investigating how various place stakeholders collaborate in place branding. The paper contributes to place branding theory by revealing organizational configurations of rural place branding processes depending on local actors' constellation and engagement in rural place branding.

Literature Review

Place brands and place branding

It has been argued that place is not an object but rather a 'dynamic holistic entity' (Greenop and Darchen, 2015), built upon the identity, relations, and history, which are subject to ongoing changes. Consequently, different actors and stakeholders interact in constructing and giving meaning to the place brand (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015; Medway and Warnaby, 2014). Thus, a place brand is a 'relational network brand' (Hankinson, 2016, p. 114) that is built by extending 'the core brand through effective relationships with stakeholders' (Hankinson, 2016, p. 116).

The relational network perspective of place brands implies that presenting a consistent brand proposition is challenging. Place branding, i.e. 'the conscious process of creating, gaining, enhancing, and reshaping the distinct presence of a place in the minds and hearts of people' (Boisen, 2015), needs to involve the relevant stakeholders in all process stages (Kavaratzis, 2012).

In the context of cities, place branding is often a governance strategy to communicate and influence the perceptions and behaviours of citizens or visitors (Karens *et al.*, 2016)

and a tool of policymaking at different levels and in different contexts (Kalandides, 2011). Place branding for cities is typically part of the administrative and political context (Braun, 2012) and an ‘established aspect of public administration’ (Hankinson, 2009).

The inherent complexities in place branding have been accounted for in proposals for more collaborative place branding models. Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013) propose understanding place branding as a facilitator of a place identity process, which then informs the quality and character of the brand experience. Consequently, they support the notion of place branding as a set of intertwined collective sub-processes instead of a single managerial process (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013).

Because of the complex, multi-actor nature of place branding processes (Hankinson, 2009; Kavaratzis, 2012), this study understands place branding processes as processes of value co-creation, during which multiple actors provide and utilize resources to create value jointly (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). Thus, place branding here is understood as a value creating service eco-system driven by various actors’ engagement and resource integration.

Place branding as service eco-systems

According to Vargo *et al.* (2020), value co-creation occurs in a so-called service eco-system defined as a ‘relatively self-contained, self-adjusting system of resource-integrating actors connected by shared institutional arrangements and mutual value creation through service exchange’ (pp. 10-11). To improve resource integration and mutual value creation, actors also coordinate their actions to shape the service eco-system (Taillard *et al.*, 2016), for example, by coming together in a network to coordinate the resources they each can contribute to place branding.

Service eco-systems are partly planned for and partly emergent and cannot be designed entirely by a focal actor (Li *et al.*, 2017; Storbacka *et al.*, 2016). Individual and

collective agency, and the institutional arrangements of the social system in which they operate mutually establish service eco-systems (Taillard *et al.*, 2016). As shared intentions contribute to forming service eco-systems (Taillard *et al.*, 2016), place stakeholders' agreement on the need and goal for branding facilitates the formation of a place branding service eco-system.

As mentioned earlier, service eco-systems are self-adjusting (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). When the actors' shared intention and perception change, actors might choose to enter or leave the system (Li *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, dynamically developing relationships among resource-integrating actors can expand the service eco-system (Brodie *et al.*, 2017b). For example, once a group of actors has formalized their intentions, and a place branding service eco-system is established, additional actors might begin to engage in it. Notably, actors are involved in several concurrent co-creation processes with others (Vargo and Lusch, 2016), which suggests that 'they face multiple, potentially conflicting contexts in which they are engaged' (Alexander *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, actors might face conflicts between their involvement in place branding and other roles they hold.

Actor engagement in place branding

As a complex and dynamic phenomenon, place branding calls for an inclusive and democratic process (Kavaratzis, 2012). According to Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013), place brand managers are meant 'to initiate, facilitate, and stimulate the place brand construction process as it is undertaken by stakeholders' (p. 82). Therefore, it is necessary to invest in facilitating 'the participation of the widest possible set of stakeholders' (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 201, p. 83).

Actor engagement describes 'actors' disposition to invest resources in their interactions with other connected actors in a service system' (Brodie *et al.*, 2019). It has

been suggested as a micro foundation for value co-creation (Storbacka *et al.*, 2016), as it serves to conceptualize actors' involvement in value co-creation processes. In place branding, the engaging actors can be individual actors, including residents, entrepreneurs, politicians, businesses, or collections of individual actors, including citizen or trade associations or municipal departments. Actors' engagement disposition in a particular service eco-system is influenced by the institutional arrangements of the system and actors' need to balance roles in multiple engagement contexts (Alexander *et al.*, 2018). Both affect actors' propensity to take up interests and ideas and invest their resources for their and the other actors' benefit in a particular service eco-system (Brodie *et al.*, 2019; Taillard *et al.*, 2016).

Furthermore, engagement behaviours' temporal properties need to be considered (Storbacka *et al.*, 2016). These include the duration of actor engagement, its frequency, recency, and regularity. In addition, the level of actor engagement varies, from providing suggestions and comments to participation in specific forms of co-creation (Storbacka *et al.*, 2016). The different actor engagement behaviours may include augmenting, i.e., adding to the place brand; co-developing, i.e., facilitating the development of the brand; influencing, i.e., word-of-mouth; and mobilizing, i.e., recommendations (Alexander *et al.*, 2018; Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014). Hence, engaging actors may contribute through their skills, knowledge, time, funding, or other resources. Integrating these different resources is the core activity for the actors to co-create value, including creating and supporting the place brand.

The perspective of actor engagement implies that actors' contributions of resources, such as time, effort, and energy, go beyond what is elementary to transactional exchange (Alexander *et al.*, 2018; Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014; Cordina *et al.*, 2019; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014). In place branding, this is especially relevant, as the engagement of many

actors, such as residents, and their contributions of time and energy, are voluntary activities.

Actor groups in the place branding service eco-system can be shifting; some exist before the engagement occurs, some form because of the engagement process and may dissolve when the interest in the process fades. Therefore, eco-system evolution and development are driven by actors' constant entry and leaving (Li *et al.*, 2017). Place branding service eco-systems can, for example, involve more actors in an initial phase (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015) than once the place branding activities are implemented or vice versa. In addition, due to multiple and possibly conflicting engagement contexts, actors might withdraw resources from some of them and permanently or temporarily disengage.

A study of nation branding of Australia showed how trust in the focal organization, existing relationships between actors and the focal organization, availability or lack of resources as well as the expected value have an impact on engagement with the brand (Casidy *et al.*, 2019).

Place branding for cities and tourism destinations is often a top-down process under the leadership of professionals at the city council, DMO, or municipal administration (e.g., Anholt, 2010). However, rural places with fewer resources often depend on a diverse group of actors and residents to engage in place branding (Gyimóthy, 2019). Waade *et al.* (2019) identified the practice of 'collaborative place making' (p. 105) to have the potential to increase community wellbeing while also functioning as place branding. This bottom-up practice is common in Nordic rural places, often characterized by self-organized, communitarian initiatives (Broegaard *et al.*, 2019, Waade *et al.*, 2019). The inclusive and networked character of the recent Nordic rural place brands further shows that local support is not limited to finding trusted brand ambassadors. It is also

‘resource optimizing and crowdsourcing of labour, ideas and immaterial property’ (Gyimóthy, 2019). While such communitarian initiatives are often characterized by inclusiveness, resource scarcity is typically the primary driver because ‘all available resources are considered valuable and vital’ (Gyimóthy, 2019).

Gulisova (2021) developed a typology of rural place branding processes according to the involvement of place stakeholders in them. More specifically, the identified place branding process types differ based on a focal actor’s existence (or non-existence). The processes further differ on whether and how other actor groups, including residents, local businesses, local authorities, researchers, regional or local organizations (e.g., NGOs, national parks), and external actors, are involved. These types include approaches where a focal actor takes the steering role and is supported by consultants (FA+C), those where a focal actor collaborates with a few (FA+FP) or with many (FA+MP) local actor groups, and those where many different actors (MDA) share the responsibility for branding (Gulisova, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

The typology Gulisova (2021) developed differentiates rural place branding processes according to the existence of a focal actor and other actor groups involved in the place branding. However, it does not provide insight into the roles of the involved actors in the place branding process. This study, therefore, aims to refine this basic typology by including the determinants of actor engagement in place branding and how these relate to the social, structural, and administrative context of places.

As explained above, place branding here is understood as a value creating service eco-system driven by various actors’ engagement and resource integration. Based on the literature review of rural place branding processes and applying the theoretical perspective of service eco-systems and actor engagement, the following needs for further

developing the typology of rural place branding processes have been identified. First, besides the existence of a focal actor (Gulisova, 2021), the emergence of this actor should be included. The focal actor might pre-exist or be established for the specific purpose of place branding. This existence or establishment may impact its role within the process (Li *et al.*, 2017). Second, in addition to the identification of the actor groups involved in the process of place branding (Gulisova, 2021), their specific actor engagement properties, including duration, frequency, and regularity of their engagement (Storbacka *et al.*, 2016), termination of engagement (Li *et al.*, 2017), resources contributed, as well as their specific engagement behaviours (Alexander *et al.*, 2018; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014; Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014; Storbacka *et al.*, 2016) need to be understood. Third, the organizational properties of the place branding process as a service eco-system, including its degrees of formalization and centralization, should be included. The intentionality of the formation of the place branding eco-system should be considered (Li *et al.*, 2017; Taillard *et al.*, 2016), as this affects the formalization of the branding process, while the role of the focal actor determines the degree of centralization of the process (Storbacka *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, both the formalization and centralization of the place branding process are interdependent with its strategic direction, which, therefore, should also be determined (Hankinson, 2009; Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015). We, therefore, suggest an extension and refinement of Gulisova's (2021) typology of place branding processes along three dimensions: (i) focal actor, (ii) actor engagement, and (iii) organization.

Research Design

Case selection

For the current study, different rural places in Denmark were chosen to provide the empirical data. Similar to other countries, many rural communities in Denmark are

challenged due to depopulation (Sørensen, 2018), while also suffering from negative press coverage and the low status attached to living there (Sørensen and Svendsen, 2014). In a study on the Danish population's attitudes towards rural areas, it was recommended to use marketing strategies, including local branding, to improve their reputation among the public (Sørensen and Svendsen, 2014). As a result, many small towns and villages in Denmark started developing their brands (Andersen, 2015), and most Danish municipalities have spent considerable money on branding (JydskeVestkysten, 2017). Therefore, it was deemed timely to study the different approaches applied for place branding in Denmark's different types of rural areas.

One of the classifications of Danish municipalities, which are the local level authorities in the country, categorizes them as city-, middle-, rural- or outskirt municipalities (Social- og Indenrigsministeriet, 2020). However, rural places include not only municipalities but also small towns, villages, islands, and other rural communities that administratively belong to one of the 98 municipalities. For this study, we chose to include different types of rural places, including villages (Darum – D, Gørding – G, Rødding – R, Selde – S, Billum – B), small towns (Ribe – Ri, Oksbøl - O), an island (Fur – F) and rural or outskirt municipalities (Esbjerg – EK, Varde -VK, Skive-SK). Thereby, we aimed to gain insight into the relationship between different types of place branding approaches and the places' social, geographic, and administrative characteristics. The places were identified through a workshop on rural place branding, a rural research conference, and a call for participation in the newsletter of the Danish Centre for Rural Research (Center for Landdistriktsforskning, 2018). The researchers conducted an additional search of places to complete the selection. An overview of the cases is provided in the supplementary Appendix 1.

Research methodology

To gain in-depth insight into the place branding processes, qualitative, exploratory methodology was applied. Departments responsible for place branding in the municipalities and local citizen associations in the smaller places were approached first to identify a set of knowledgeable participants in each place. Then, snowball sampling was used to find additional actors engaged in branding the places, stopping when information redundancy was reached (Jennings, 2010). To avoid high similarity among the participants, the researchers approached additional actors who were not mentioned through snowball sampling, but who were identified through readings of promotional materials, local newspapers, etc. This maximum variation sampling approach provided a more comprehensive range of data, with broader points of view on the phenomenon studied and ensured multivocality (Tracy, 2013). Between one and nine participants from each place were identified through this approach and included in the study. A brief description of the participants from each place is shown in the supplementary Appendix 2.

Semi-structured interviews (Lee and Aslam, 2018) using an interview guide (supplementary Appendix 3) were conducted with 50 representatives of rural places. The interviews lasted between 17 and 89 minutes, were recorded, transcribed in the original language (Danish), and thematically analysed (Clarke *et al.*, 2015). Deductive coding according to the theoretical framework was applied for the analysis. The concepts of service eco-systems and actor engagement served to develop the dimensions of the typology and hence for the identification of generic place branding types (Jaakkola, 2020, Lindgreen *et al.*, 2020). Documents, including websites, were used for triangulation to enhance the internal validity (Merriam and Grenier, 2019). Therefore, the findings are

transferable (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) to other place branding cases in similar contexts to those studied here, rather than generalizable.

Findings

This section presents the study's findings related to the existence and type of focal actor, other actor groups and their engagement, and the organization of the place branding process. A typology based on these dimensions is presented before the findings are discussed in the following section.

Existence and type of focal actor

In places with administrative and political power, i.e., the municipalities, the communication department takes the role of the focal actor. In Esbjerg municipality, a public-private business organization shares the role with the municipal communication department. There are different focal actors in the places without such an administrative unit.

In Ribe, Fur, Rødding and Selde, various local actors formed either a joint marketing group, a development council, or a special interest group to coordinate the branding, i.e., to function as the focal actor. For example, in Ribe, 'something called Ribe Joint Marketing was created' (Ri9) by the business association, the four cultural institutions, various accommodation providers, and restaurants and cafes. In this network, they pool resources and use them to attract visitors to the town. In towns with more limited resources, where branding is often integrated with the general place development, local actors form a development council to optimize resource use and apply a more strategic approach to place branding. The head of Fur's development group explained that 'it was not just supposed to be a working group under an existing association... No, we simply had to establish a new organization that was supposed to work strategically with it' (F1).

The development councils are formed by local businesses, citizen and tourism associations, local foundations, sports, and other associations. The representatives from each association or company report back to their respective organizations. Place branding can also develop from a special-interest initiative, such as the arts initiative in Selde, where the special interest group becomes the focal actor.

In places that only recently started to consider place branding, instead of new organizations the local citizen councils initiate and coordinate the branding approach. Sometimes, the number of actors involved in the branding is minimal:

We are us two, but every time we agree that it is the easiest, ... we work well together, think a lot in the same way, and want the same things. I think it's easier than to involve all possible others and to be so democratic....it is not to exclude anybody. (D3).

Finally, there are places where several groups or individuals work towards the same goal, yet without a strategic plan or coordinated efforts. For example, in Billum, they established a PR group, but it was only responsible for updates of the webpage (B3). Two other associations became involved, the parish association working with resident attraction and the property- and business investment association concentrating its efforts on business attraction.

Other actor groups and their engagement

In the municipalities, the municipal council and manager supported the communication department, which depended on their continuing support for the brand (SK1). Professional branding consultants were hired for the initial phase. The local business community, cultural and educational institutions, and (sometimes) citizens were invited to workshops to discuss and develop the place's values and identity. Afterward, a local design bureau created the visual expression of the brand based on the consultants'

proposal, and the municipal council approved the design. In Esbjerg municipality, the designers engaged throughout the entire brand definition, design, and implementation process and further work with the municipality. In contrast, they disengaged in Varde municipality after the initial phase when the value propositions started to develop further, ‘after some time, I pushed it away, and I didn’t think the municipality understood the task they should be doing’ (VK6). Hence, in the longer-term local actor engagement decreased, and only a few actors kept engaging with the municipal branding. A representative of a festival organization in Skive municipality explained that their engagement with the brand was ‘nothing else than that we, of course, apply for the ‘Rent Liv’ fund for subsidies’ (SK4). Nevertheless, they also try to live up to the values of the municipal brand.

In Varde Municipality, a group of business owners presented to other companies how they used the municipal brand in their businesses to inspire more companies to engage with it. The lack of a brand coordinator was perceived as a problem for the engagement with the brand by several interviewees in Varde Municipality, especially for the business community (VK4, VK5, VK6, but also B2). Further, a business owner pointed out a difference in the working cultures of the municipality and the businesses since ‘the municipality backs out as soon as we start talking about something concrete, they like to talk about it, but then they back out’ (VK4). It was also acknowledged that it is not the formal organizations alone that create the brand, but that other actors, though informally, influence the brand and contribute to brand co-creation. For example, a museum director and vice chairman of the municipal business organization expressed that ‘there is the informal if you can say it that way. And there are all the companies that define what Esbjerg Municipality is, based on what they do. ... then there is the civilian population ...’ (EK4).

Very often, residents, individually or as members of associations, local businesses, and associations were involved in the branding. Many activities in Ribe, for example, were driven by residents. Some even created an association to take care of the historical buildings. However, it is often the same people involved in the different activities. An interviewee from the island of Fur stressed that except for the strategy development, it is ‘residents on the island, who are the ones making the difference in the end’ (F1).

Not many residents were involved in developing a strategy for place branding, but there was a high willingness to volunteer when practical help with concrete tasks was needed (D3). A resident in Oksbøl mentioned that it was easier to find people ‘to work with some ad-hoc tasks because they can relate to their task. And they know that it ends at some point in time’ (O3). Further, many local ‘business owners choose to take their time’ (B2) to be involved in the branding or support it ‘either with arms or legs or financially’ (G2).

Sometimes, the municipality was also engaging with the place brands of small towns, islands, and villages, either through knowledge exchange, communication of the brand, or through the provision of funding or skills. For example, in Fur, Rødding, and Selde, the municipality provided support by hiring consultants. A representative from the apple festival in Rødding mentioned that Skive municipality had hired a consultant to provide advice on ‘different areas here, to help with places where you can do events’, and that different small towns could ask for help from the consultant and discuss their ideas with her (R1). Other external actors, including researchers, architects, and artists, were often involved during the process.

Organization of the collaboration

The organization of the place branding processes in terms of their formalization, centralization, and strategic orientation varied considerably across the different places. In

the municipalities, an official municipal brand was created as a result of workshops led by branding consultants. Hence, as the focal actor in the process, the municipal communication department was responsible for brand development. Despite this centralized strategic approach, other actors shaped the brand through their actions, though informally. For example, the director of the local radio station in Skive Municipality distinguished between the paid radio spots they do for the official municipal brand and the organic interviews or news stories about positive things happening in the municipality. This example highlights how other actors co-create the brand and contribute to creating its meaning, despite the leadership of a strong focal actor.

The smaller towns, islands, and villages had different ways of organizing the collaboration. The highest degrees of organization were observed in places doing place branding for a long time. The process was formalized and centralized around the focal actor, and there was a high strategic focus. In Ribe, the joint marketing network worked well ‘because we have the collaboration we have, and we know each other so well, and often sit around the same table, talk together, so, it is easy to find out what makes sense’ (Ri2). In Rødding and Fur, the development councils have been formed to take care of the strategic aspects of the branding while leaving the daily tasks to other associations. In this way, some resources were released, and more people could engage with the branding as they could choose to engage on an ad-hoc basis, while others took care of the strategic part. In Selde, the origin of the place branding was an art gallery which ‘started 40 years ago, as something completely different. It has never been the idea that it should brand Selde’ (S1). Even though the gallery was initially a small initiative, it has not only survived but become the anchor for engagement in strategic place branding. This development happened due to the initiators’ ‘stubbornness... and so, the story has taken

a new turn; now, it has become something to gather around, and so you can brand the town because you have something to show' (S1).

In places that only recently started branding, no new organizations have been set up, but the local citizen councils try to initiate and coordinate the branding process. For example, in Gørding, 'there are four people in the branding group... who are from the local council, and then we have our webmaster' (G1). Hence, there is some formalization of the process, which can be seen as centralized around the branding group. Their initiatives have some strategic direction, but not as much as in the municipalities and places with long-term branding experience.

Finally, there are small towns and villages where the place branding is a rather ad-hoc activity. Several groups or individuals work towards the same goal, yet without a strategic plan or coordinated efforts. There are often many good intentions, but there is a lack of strategy or focus, 'I think that branding concerning Oksbøl suffers because there is no guiding strategy' (O2). Instead, the branding is fragmented, with each local association doing its activities. For example, in Billum, two associations cooperated on some aspects, but they did not coordinate their efforts.

Typology of rural place branding processes

Through our analysis, we identified four typical combinations of the dimensions of the theoretical framework and, hence, four types of rural place branding processes (table D).

		Administrative led	Community-based		
<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Sub-dimension</i>	Type 1: Administrative led	Type 2: Experience-based	Type 3: Transitional	Type 4: Ad-hoc
Focal actor	<i>Existence of focal actor</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partly

	<i>Types of focal actor</i>		Existing (administrati on)	New	Existing (communit y)	Existing (communit y)
Actor engagement	<i>Focal actor</i>	<i>Tempora l propertie s</i>	Throughout	Througho ut	Throughout	Periodical
		<i>Behavio ral propertie s</i>	Augmenting Co-developing Influencing Mobilizing	Augmenti ng Co-developin g Influencin g Mobilizin g	Augmentin g Co-developing Influencing Mobilizing	Augmentin g Co-developing Influencin g Mobilizing
		<i>Resourc es</i>	Skills Funding	Skills Money Time	Skills Time	Skills Time
	<i>Residents</i>	<i>Tempora l propertie s</i>	Punctual Some periodical	Many regularly Some ad-hoc Some periodical	Some regularly Some ad-hoc Some periodical	Some regularly Some ad-hoc Some periodical
		<i>Behavio ral propertie s</i>	Augmenting Co-developing Influencing	Augmenti ng Co-developin g Influencin g	Augmentin g Co-developing Influencing	Augmentin g Co-developing Influencin g Mobilizing
		<i>Resourc es</i>	Opinions Skills	Time Skills	Time Skills	Time Skills Money
	<i>Business community</i>	<i>Tempora l propertie s</i>	Punctual Some regularly	Many regularly Some ad-hoc	Some regularly Some ad-hoc	Some regularly Some ad-hoc
		<i>Behavio ral propertie s</i>	Augmenting Co-developing Influencing Mobilizing	Augmenti ng Co-developin g Influencin g Mobilizin g	Augmentin g Co-developing Influencing Mobilizing	Augmentin g Co-developing Influencin g Mobilizing
		<i>Resourc es</i>	Opinions Skills	Time Skills Money	Time Skills Money	Time Skills Money
	<i>Education al, cultural,</i>	<i>Tempora l</i>	Punctual Some periodical	Periodical	Periodical	Periodical

	<i>sport organizations</i>	<i>properties</i>				
		<i>Behavioral properties</i>	Co-developing Influencing	Augmenting Co-developing Influencing Mobilizing	Augmenting Co-developing Influencing Mobilizing	Augmenting Co-developing Influencing Mobilizing
		<i>Resources</i>	Opinion Connections	Time Skills Connections	Time Skills Connections	Time Skills Connections
	<i>Municipality</i>	<i>Temporal properties</i>	Long term	Periodical	Periodical	Punctual
		<i>Behavioral properties</i>	Augmenting Co-developing Influencing Mobilizing	Augmenting Co-developing Influencing	Augmenting Co-developing Influencing	Augmenting Co-developing Influencing
		<i>Resources</i>	Political and admin. approval	Skills Funding	Skills Funding	Funding
	<i>External actors</i>	<i>Temporal properties</i>	Punctual Some long-term	Periodical Punctual	Punctual	N/A
		<i>Behavioral properties</i>	Co-developing	Augmenting Co-developing Influencing Mobilizing	Augmenting Co-developing Influencing Mobilizing	N/A
		<i>Resources</i>	Skills	Skills	Skills	N/A
	Organization	<i>Formalization</i>	Highly formalized	Formalized	Somewhat formalized	Not formalized
		<i>Centralization</i>	Highly centralized around the focal actor	Centralized around the focal actor	Medium	Decentralized
		<i>Strategic orientation</i>	High strategic focus	High strategic focus	Some strategic orientation	No strategic orientation

Table I. Typology of rural place branding processes

Three place branding process types are community-based initiatives that mainly differ regarding the degree of organization of their place branding process and the type of focal actor. The fourth type includes all the administrative municipalities and is substantially different, as the branding here is rather centralized, with the administrative authorities as the focal actors. The rural place branding processes range from the administration-led type (type 1; here: the municipalities), which is highly formalized, centralized, and strategically driven, through the experience-based process of type 2 (here: Ribe, Rødding, Fur, Selde) that is formalized, strategic and somewhat centralized and the medium-level formalized, centralized and strategic transitional processes of type 3 (here: Darum, Gørding), to the ad-hoc, non-formalized initiatives of type 4 without a significant focal actor (here: Billum, Oksbøl).

Type 1, the administration-led type is one where an already existing focal actor, usually the place administration, strategically works with the place branding. The process is highly formalized and centralized around the focal actor. Residents, local associations, and local businesses engage periodically or punctually, mainly by providing opinion in the initial phases of the branding process. They are rarely actively engaged, and only a few provide skills later in the branding process. It is the focal actor who provides funding and skills, and external actors are punctually engaged.

Type 2, the experience-based type is one where the place branding process is formalized and centralized around a newly created focal actor, who works strategically with the branding. Residents, local associations, and local businesses are actively engaged throughout the entire process, providing skills and time. The municipality is regularly engaged, and often contributes funding and skills for branding. Focal actor provides

funding, skills, and time, and in this type, external actor engagement is more regular than in the other types.

Type 3, the transitional type, is one where an existing local actor takes on the role of focal actor for place branding. There is some strategic orientation in the place branding, and the process is somewhat formalized and slightly centralized around the focal actor. Residents, local associations, and local businesses are actively engaged throughout the entire process, providing skills and time. The focal actor provides funding, skills, and time, while the municipality regularly engages in the process, contributing funding and skills. There is a punctual external actor engagement.

Type 4, the ad-hoc type is one with only a partial focal actor, usually an already existing local association. It is a non-formalized, decentralized process, where the strategic orientation is lacking. Residents, local associations, and businesses are actively engaged, providing skills, time, and funding throughout the entire process. When engaged, the focal actor provides funding, skills and time, and the municipality also punctually provides funding for the place branding. There was no mention of external actor involvement in this type.

The three community-based approaches (type 2, 3, and 4) could be seen as a progression. A community might start their place branding through some ad-hoc activities (type 4), where the actors are not necessarily coordinated around an overall strategic goal, perhaps due to low interest by some of them or a lack of resources. When the actors start discussing branding more strategically, they might establish a branding or marketing working group under the citizen council/association and adopt a transitional process type (type 3). While such a group might not represent many local actors, the group will be assigned responsibilities for the place branding process and become increasingly visible to actors interested in engaging with branding. Finally, impulses from external

actors (e.g., a municipality, a researcher, a consultant) or internal realization might lead to establishing a new association to implement a more strategic and professionalized approach to place branding and gather more actors around it (type 2). The progression might take years, emphasizing the importance of time in service eco-system formation (Storbacka *et al.*, 2016; Taillard *et al.*, 2016).

Discussion

This section discusses the relationship between the dimensions in each type, and how the service-ecosystem perspective influenced the typology. In administration-led processes (type 1), the focal actor, i.e., the municipal communication department, provides the brand, yet investments in human resources are necessary to create actor engagement by a wider community. Such investments can be a person responsible for coordinating the resource integration of different actors or investment of financial resources in either sponsorship or as incentives for communities and events to engage with the municipal brand.

In experience-based processes (type 2), the importance of shared and externalized intentions and the formation of institutionalized arrangements, as Taillard *et al.* (2016) suggested, were evident. In all four cases, new networks have been created (Li *et al.*, 2017) for branding, and, unless the focus of the branding was very specialized (i.e., art), many actors engaged with it. As proposed by Li *et al.* (2017) these networks or eco-systems were extending or shrinking, depending on the actors' engagement.

In transitional place branding processes (type 3), the focal actor was often the local citizen council and, more specifically, a small group of people interested in engaging with the branding. In Darum, they had not yet had discussions about the need for more organized place branding, i.e., the shared intentionality was not yet there. As such, the few like-minded people took it on themselves to do something about the branding, and

the place branding service eco-system is only emerging (Taillard *et al.*, 2016). In Gørding, the shared intentions had been formalized, and a new focal actor in the form of a branding working group (Li *et al.*, 2017) under the local citizen council emerged to engage in the branding. In both cases, there was support from the business community and local citizens, especially when help with practical tasks was needed.

Even in ad-hoc place branding processes (type 4), there are identifiable focal actors, i.e., the citizen and business association or the parish association. However, they have not been focused on strategic work with branding so far. Many actors engaged in the branding and shared intentions, but the degree of institutionalization of the place branding service eco-system is still low (Taillard *et al.*, 2016). This lack of institutionalization could be due to a lack of resources, such as time or competencies, which different interviewees mentioned as an obstacle to levelling up the place branding activities.

This study further revealed interesting findings related to actor engagement in place branding service eco-systems over time. In administration-led processes (type 1), there was broad actor engagement in the beginning, i.e., when the brand was being defined. However, once the brand was 'alive', the engagement decreased, and incentives were needed to (re-) create it. A similar issue was presented by Kavaratzis and Kalandides (2015), who found that citizens were only involved in the initial consultancy phase of place branding. Our findings suggest this is the case for citizens and other actor groups unless they have a special interest in the brand (e.g., the few businesses in Varde municipality that use the municipal brand to promote their products). In contrast, actor engagement stretched over a longer period in the community-based approaches (type 2, 3, 4). Nevertheless, while in some places, there was broad actor engagement (Ribe, Rødding, Fur, Billum), in others, fewer actors engaged (Selde, Darum). Therefore, even in the community-based place branding process types, long-term engagement of a wide

variety of actors is not necessarily the norm. Still, actor engagement in the community-based approaches lasts longer throughout the process.

In the community-based types, all actor groups engage in similar actor engagement behaviours, especially augmenting, co-developing, influencing, and often also mobilizing behaviour. In contrast, in administration-led processes (type 1), several actor groups only engage in one engagement behaviour, for example, the sponsored sports clubs in influencing or the consultants and designers in co-developing behaviours. In addition, municipalities contribute more resources and engage more in experience-based and transitional branding processes (type 2 and 3) than in ad-hoc processes (type 4). Finally, more external actors are engaging in transitional place branding processes (type 2) than in the other community-based approaches.

In the municipalities, the interviewees pointed out the tension between engagement with the brand created through the formalized approach and other branding initiatives. Similarly, in the community-based approaches, regardless of the degree of formalization, it was pointed out that there were both actors directly involved in the specific branding initiatives and other businesses, associations, and local people contributing to the branding of the place more indirectly. The informally or indirectly contributing actors also continuously co-create the brand's meaning (Fayzullaev *et al.*, 2021; Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013). This co-creation also allows for more organic communication (Hankinson, 2004), which does not occur with the official brand when the audience does not see the connection between the place and the brand. Interviewees in the municipalities especially mentioned this point. However, the informal type of engagement is often unstructured, not necessarily supporting the presentation of the same brand identity.

Conclusion, limitations, and further research

Different types of rural places take different approaches to place branding. While an apparent focal actor to facilitate and lead the process of place branding exists in places with administrative authorities, the focal actor must emerge in places without such authorities. Otherwise, the approach will lack the strategic focus by being fragmented.

Based on the existence and type of a focal actor, the engagement of the focal and other actors, and the organization of the place branding approach, we have identified four different types of rural place branding approaches, i.e., the formalized, administration-led approach (type 1); the formalized, experience- and community-based approach (type 2) where place branding has been done for some time; the somewhat formalized, transitional community-based approach (type 3) where a focal actor has begun to take steps towards more organization; and the ad-hoc, community-based approach (type 4) where the formalization and coordinated approach is missing yet. While the first type is applied in municipalities with administrative power, the other three approaches are applied in non-administrative, rural places. Our research question was to see how the organization of rural place branding processes relates to the type of involved actors and their engagement in the process. The typology proposed in this paper shows that the organization of rural place branding process has implications for actor engagement, especially regarding the number and variety of actors engaging in the process, and the duration and ways of their engagement.

Building the theoretical framework for the study upon concepts of service ecosystems and actor engagement has contributed to a more dynamic understanding of the place branding process types. The service eco-systems provided the frame for the identification of focal actors and their roles in shaping the place branding process, by inviting other actors into it. From the actor engagement literature, especially the focus on

temporal and behavioural properties of engagement of the actors, played a role in differentiating between the types of process.

This study contributes to the field of place branding by proposing a typology of rural place branding approaches based on the type of focal actor, engagement properties and behaviours of different actor groups, and the level of organization of the processes. The findings provide guidance for those involved in place branding to form an association or a group of local actors to take the role of the focal actor in order to formalize their place branding and adopt a strategic approach to it. The degree of formalization and strategic direction of the place branding process determines the opportunities to attract external resources, for example, public funding and the engagement of other actors in the branding process. Place branding practitioners can further use the typology to identify the resources they can expect the local actors to contribute.

This qualitative study is based on a sample of rural places in Denmark; therefore, the findings are not generalizable, but they are transferable to other place branding cases in similar contexts. These limitations call for further research regarding various aspects. Firstly, it would be interesting to investigate how suitable the application of the different place branding process types is to achieve various place branding goals. Second, it would be important for the community-based process types to understand how individual actors' different backgrounds, motivations, and specific resources (education, professional skills) influence actor engagement and, hence, place branding and its outcomes. Third, international comparative studies could shed light on the applicability of the typology to other contexts. Fourth, testing whether similar differences exist in major cities and their neighbourhoods (corresponding to the municipalities and smaller places here) would be worthwhile for further developing a general place branding theory. It is behind the scope of this study to include other published case studies of rural place branding in the

typology, as these rarely specify the degrees of involvement of different actor groups. Yet, more case studies of different rural place branding initiatives could add to developing the proposed typology.

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